

by Alex Bloom -

[The Arizona Republic](#)

Hundreds of Valley unemployed residents will go back to school and gain new skills thanks to federal stimulus dollars.

At least 90 people can begin job training classes at Maricopa Community Colleges as part of \$200,000 to \$300,000 from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. More will follow during the next few months.

"It's an opportunity for our colleges and faculty and staff to help rebuild our community," said Mary Vanis, director of the colleges' Center for Workforce Development, which will provide the classes in partnership with the workforce-development arms of Maricopa County and Phoenix.

The stimulus money will pay for tuition, materials, and licensure and certification testing. The first groups could start classes as early as Oct. 19.

Maricopa Workforce Connections and Phoenix Workforce Connection routinely see Valley residents looking for employment help. The two centers provide one-on-one counseling, resume building, interview classes and public computers for job searches.

Earlier this year, the two groups learned that they would receive about \$7.9 million each in stimulus funds, including money earmarked for job training. They sat down with the Center for Workforce Development to create ways to provide more extensive and focused career training.

In the past, the groups have used Phoenix College for job training. But the October classes will be accelerated over six to nine months, rather than offered over the traditional semester.

Residents who enroll will have training choices identified for potential growth in Arizona: health care, information technology, dental assisting and solar-panel installation, among others.

"It's condensed, and it's faster than just the normal certificate curriculum. And it's a whole group starting at once," said Patrick Burkhart, assistant director for human services of the workforce-development division at Maricopa Workforce Connections. "It provides flexibility both to the community-college district and to the workforce system."

### **Training facilities are busy**

The workforce-development groups have seen increases at their facilities:

- Phoenix watched visits to its three facilities and two satellite facilities more than double between July 2008 and June 2009, increasing from 90,000 to 186,000 over the same period between 2007 and 2008.
- Maricopa's two facilities, in Glendale and Gilbert, received a combined 3,500 visits in December 2007, the start of the recession. The two facilities received 14,600 visitors last month, and Burkhart expects the numbers to rise.

"Right now, we are 4 1/2 times as busy as before the recession started," Burkhart said.

Maricopa plans to spend about \$2 million of the stimulus dollars on job training. Phoenix will spend a combined \$1.6 million of its annual budget and stimulus dollars on job training.

Trainees entering next month's classes have been working with the two workforce-development groups for months. Valley residents interested in signing up for the job training should visit a Phoenix or a Maricopa workforce center.

Maricopa County and Phoenix each receive federal funding from the Workforce Investment Act to help people who have recently lost their jobs, people who have language or educational barriers to employment, and low-income or disadvantaged youths seeking work.

Stimulus funds were allocated based on Workforce Investment Act funds.

President Barack Obama has said that he wants the money to be spent quickly and efficiently, getting people trained and returned to the workforce in growing industries.

### **Learning as a task for life**

Stan Flowers, a workforce development supervisor at Phoenix Workforce Connection, said the training programs are just the start for people staring out in new career fields.

"We need people to be better prepared. We need people to be better educated," Flowers said. "We need people to understand that they need to be continually working on their skills - not just this job and that's it."

Rep. Harry Mitchell toured Maricopa Workforce Connections' Gilbert facility earlier this month. Spending to create the cohorts is stimulus money working, the Arizona Democrat said, emphasizing that job training is essential because many jobs may not be coming back.

"(Education and training are) a lifelong endeavor to me, and I support all of those programs," said Mitchell, a retired high-school teacher.

Maricopa's Mary Vanis said the newly designed courses will improve the county's delivery of training programs.

"I see this as the way we'll do business in the future - and not just something we're doing because of the high unemployment," Vanis said.